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SUBJECT: AY QANOOM: IS THE AFGHAN-TAJIK BORDER CROSSING POINT
NECESSARY?

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Ay Qanoom is one of five official border crossings between Afghanistan and Tajikistan. The Northern Alliance established a ferry service there in 2001 to import supplies to fight the Taliban; however, the rationale for its existence has since disappeared, especially given the opening of the new Afghan-Tajik bridge at Sher Khan Bandar. The unreliable and limited capacity ferry currently exports 125 tons of Pakistani cement a day and imports next to nothing. A more efficient use of the Afghan Customs and Border Police personnel would be closure of the port and re-allocation to more utilized facilities.

¶2. (U) The Ay Qanoom border crossing is in Dascht-e Qala district of Takhar province in northeast Afghanistan, approximately 70 km from the provincial capital on unpaved road. The ferry and border-crossing point opened in 2001 to supply the Northern Alliance. With the fall of the Taliban, and the access to more convenient transportation routes, trade volume fell dramatically. Pakistani cement is currently the only exported product: 10-12 trucks deliver approximately 125 tons per day to the ferry. Nothing is currently imported. The Afghan privately-run ferry was out of commission for three months due to mechanical problems and only re-opened with reduced capacity in April 2008. The Tajik ferry stopped running several years ago. Passengers and private vehicles may use the ferry; however, the traffic is minimal to non-existent.

¶3. (U) On the Tajik side, the crossing is called Kokul, and is served by the Kokul Border Guard and Customs Service points near the town of Parkhar in the Hamodoni Border District. The road network servicing the crossing is quite poor. Embassy Dushanbe's Office of Defense Cooperation intends to renovate the Kokul Border Guard garrison, but not the crossing site. Despite the infrastructure challenges of the site, the Tajiks continue to look for solutions to increase use of the port, including an impractical proposal to move the temporary bridge and the passenger ferry from Sher Khan Bandar to Ay Qanoom. The Tajik interest in enhanced port operations is greater than the Afghan interest, given that they receive imports through the crossing.

¶4. (SBU) The Takhar Customs Office has tasked the Afghan Customs Director at the port to increase duty income. The Afghan Customs Director and the Afghan Border Police Commissioner believe that an improved road network, a bridge and new facilities would result in greater trade, although it is unclear whether demand exists. There was no request for USG assistance with these priorities; however, CSTC-A has a project on the FY2010 Supplemental list to build a border police facility at Ay Qanoom. This project will construct administrative, billeting, dining and working dog facilities for the

border police to support operations at the actual border crossing point.

¶5. (SBU) The Afghan Customs Director was unable to explain why traders would use the Ay Qanoom route as opposed to the new Afghan-Tajik bridge in Sher Khan Bandar. He speculated that it might be easier to distribute the cement in the remote areas of Tajikistan from Ay Qanoom. However, to reach Ay Qanoom from Kunduz, the Pakistani cement must travel five hours on unpaved, ungraveled roads as compared with the one-hour transit time from Kunduz to Sher Khan Bandar. The actual amount of exported cement is insignificant when compared to the traffic at Sher Khan Bandar (less than 3% of total vehicle volume).

¶6. (SBU) The Ay Qanoom border crossing has minimal trade volume and a terrible road network. The Afghan customs and border police are far from external oversight, especially since the Afghan Border Brigade headquarters transferred from Takhar's provincial capital, Taloqan, to Mazar-e Sharif in Balkh province. It may be worthwhile for the Afghan government to close Ay Qanoom and deploy its border police and customs personnel to other border crossings or posts along the border.

¶7. (U) This report has been coordinated with Embassy Dushanbe.

WOOD